

Alternatives honored at PAG ceremony

By Philip S. Moore, Inside Tucson Business

When the presentation speeches at the Pima Association of Governments' mass transit awards ceremony were drowned out by a long trainload of new automobiles, the irony of the moment wasn't lost on the event's organizers.

But they pressed on, celebrating those who leave their automobiles at home and especially the employers to support their choice by providing transportation options.

Because, whether their goal was preserving the environment, conserving natural resources, containing the cost of urban growth or just getting other people to stop tying up rush hour traffic, the association said the 40 companies with offices in Tucson should be honored for their efforts.

At a special awards ceremony on the platform of the Historic Tucson Depot downtown, PAG celebrated the five local firms in Forbes magazine's list of the top 130 private companies in the nationwide list of 500 largest public and private organizations to be named the Best Workplaces for Commuters by the U.S. Department of Environmental Quality.

Honored locally for the first time this year at the annual event on Oct. 18 was American Airlines reservations center, which supports a telework program that has reduced the number of commute round trips by more than 6 percent.

Marking its second year on the list was Honeywell Aerospace. Sarah Stillman and Arturo Prieto coordinate an annual alternative transportation at both Honeywell's Drexel and Oracle Road locations. The company also subsidizes the entire cost of employee bus fares.

IBM's Barbara Ricca was recognized for her annual safety and environmental fair for employees. She also serves on the PAG Travel Reduction Program Regional Task Force and has helped IBM nationally make the EPA list each year since it was started in 2003.

Raytheon Missile Systems, through the efforts of Transportation Coordinator Ronnie Gonzales, also on the Travel Reduction Program Regional Task Force, was recognized for the fourth consecutive time. Raytheon was cited for paying bus and vanpool subsidies for employees.

Loews Ventana Canyon Resort and Spa was honored for operating a shuttle between the Catalina Foothills resort to connect with Sun Tran routes.

"These employers are offering a more cost-effective solution," said Andy Gunning, PAG's planning director.

In fact, PAG is one of nine community organizations to recognized local companies that made the Best Workplaces for Commuters list.

Another government organization to make the EPA top 40 was the Southern Arizona Veterans Administration Health Care System.

Speaking for the University of Arizona, which has been leader in promoting everything from carpooling, to van pooling to bus passes and supporting Cat Tran, its own municipal bus system, David Heineking, associate director of operations for parking and transportation services, said the practical need for accommodating 55,000 people each day with 20,000 parking spaces "means commuter options are not just an option, but a necessity."

As the Interstate 10 reconstruction project gets underway next year, he said traffic congestion will get worse. "This creates an opportunity for us to promote alternative transportation, just as a way to keep from getting stuck in traffic. Once they start, I hope it becomes a habit, one that could continue, long after the I-10 project is completed."

Heineking admits that the effort to promoting alternative transportation attracts few participants. He also said he rarely used public transportation, himself.

"I believe it's a good cause. It's an investment in keeping the environment clean. Whether you believe in global warming or not, there's a benefit in reducing automobile pollution. Nobody wants Tucson to look like Los Angeles," he said. "If we could get more people in the program, we'd all spend less time stuck at traffic lights."

E-mail comments for publication to editor@azbiz.com. Contact Philip S. Moore by e-mail at pmoore@azbiz.com

© 2006 Inside Tucson Business. All Rights Reserved